

Tips for Parents of Students who Struggle in School

By Gayle North

Often, when a student starts to struggle in school, the parents or teachers start reacting to the student as though they were struggling on purpose. In other words, they assume negative intention behind the behaviors. They sometimes call the student lazy or unmotivated. The perception of the student when these types of labels are used is that something is wrong with him or her. In order to protect their self-esteem, the student will either fight back or withdraw in various ways. In fact, if this labeling continues, the fight to save their self-esteem, becomes the main issue rather than how to solve the school problem.

When parents and teachers look for positive intention behind behavior, students are more open to solving the real problem. The parent or teacher is perceived to be an ally instead of a foe. Sometimes the real positive intention is hard to find because it can be buried pretty deep and is out of conscious awareness. When we assume that a student wants to do well in school and that they would do well if they only knew what to do differently, we are assuming positive intention behind the student's struggle.

When we couple the notion of positive intention with the fact that nobody teaches them HOW to learn in the classroom in a way that really works for them and that nobody has taught them how to think about school in ways that make it meaningful, it helps us to see the plight of the typical struggling student. This directs us in how to solve the problem without blame or criticism.

So, how do we find hidden, unconscious positive intention? You can either put yourself in the students' experience and guess the positive intention by getting an answer to the question "What would this behavior do for me?" (remember you are them), or How would this behavior benefit me?" or "What am I wanting to happen when I do this behavior?" Remember to look for the POSITIVE reasons connected to THEIR criteria.

You can also ask the student any of the above questions. It is EXTREMELY important that you do it with rapport, bolstered by a caring, accepting, curious tone and demeanor. That is why it is so important that you believe in the notion of positive intention if you don't believe they will come across as incongruent.

When you get an answer to one of the above questions, you can elicit more important imbedded intentions by taking the answer you got and asking the same questions about it, "And what does that do for you?" You can elicit a chain of imbedded intentions, each more powerful than the one before, by continuing to ask this question for each new answer you get. When you have an idea of a possible positive intention, check it out with the student by asking the question "So what you were really wanting with that behavior was _____?"

Once you know what the positive intention is, talk to him or her as though it were true. Applaud and appreciate the fact that they are trying to do something positive and offer to assist them in achieving their positive intention. Comment on the fact that the positive intention is more consistent with who they are than is the negative behavior. Help them come up with a new behavior that is consistent with the kind of person they are AND which will satisfy their positive intention.

The more you practice this technique, the more skilled and smooth you will become in asking the questions and listening for the response and in finding the positive intention. In my experience, as you do this more and more, you will find that there are solutions to the student's dilemmas and that there is mutual respect, trust and caring that develops.

When the communication is open and honest, and you are looking for positive intentions, it is easier to look for trouble spots and their solutions. Now you can look under the other areas of "making sure they know HOW TO LEARN" and/or "making sure they have the RIGHT ATTITUDE" and/or "making sure they are TURNED ON TO SCHOOL". They deserve this approach.

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